

Waters of the New Life Promise

Genesis 9: 8-17 Mark 1: 9-15

Last Tuesday and Wednesday morning, I met individually with 14 of my 16 students at the prison for about 15-20 minutes apiece. We had reached a point in the Life Mapping class when most everyone had hit a roadblock, a matter of language and concept that I knew a brief conversation would help to straighten out. (Next time I do this class, I'll plan on doing this much sooner. I'm still learning.)

In most instances, I was just hearing their full story. One is 36 and has spent 19 years in prison, the majority of his life. He has a life sentence. He is also an artist. His pencil drawings, two portraits that he showed me, were near photographic reproductions; he's that good. But he thinks he can only draw from a set picture, that he admits to having no imagination. I'm doubting that since it takes a great deal of imagination to translate an image into another format and a different medium, maintain proportion, replicating shading and grading and highlights. Skill *and* imagination. His task is to see if he does in fact have an imagination that self-doubt had denied.

Another student is near 50 and will be getting out in a couple of years. But he has spent most of life in and out of prison. He has never had a plan in his life, never had a goal, never had an ambition. It seems amazing to me that someone can go through life and never lay claim to some sort of aim or direction. No one ever challenged him, thought enough of him to expect something from him, thought he could do anything worthwhile. He has tried but cannot pass the GED exam which is now harder. He reads at about a 7th grade level. What direction can he have at this point in his life? Can he do something now?

Another student had a childhood of turmoil and stress, showed great potential in school, and then would fall behind. Why? Turmoil in the family, moving constantly and in new schools one after another. He got through high school but fast food jobs produced fast food wages. He got in the drug business. He can arrested a few times, had some close calls, but eventually hit his stride. In his prime, he was making deals in the mid-5 figure range - \$30,000 to \$50,000 each. He thought he was invincible, flaunted it, and thereby made himself a target. I'd say he is still a guy with a lot of potential, but what now?

Case after case, men with the ability to act positively and productively had made a mess of their lives. One had been an ER doctor who lost everything – his money, his medical certification, his wife and family, and his freedom, thanks to drugs, alcohol, gambling, and hot women. He wants to return to his Asian homeland as a Christian missionary. It's certainly something for him to explore, and he's doing that.

In each of these cases, these men want desperately to get it right and not return to prison. They know that their chance of success without some kind of plan is limited. They know it takes a conscious effort to do whatever they can inside prison to prepare for their release and beginning life again. They want to embrace that new life promise

that Jesus brought in his good news. Most of them will be doing their re-entry in the next two months to 4 years. A couple of them have long terms ahead and need to find the same new life promise within the prison.

Lent is about re-connecting with that new life promise. It is a long journey that ends at the cross and crucifixion and death, which is transformed by resurrection and new life. For Christians beginning Lent, that journey begins with the water, the stories of God's bringing renewal with grace and new life in a new spiritual birth.

We start with Noah and the Flood. The Flood is God's answer to the problem of humans who seems to sin better than anything else. They excel at sin. This was not what God wanted when God created the human creature. The singular, basic thought gets stuck in God's divine sensibility that the best remedy for this flawed creature and the creation as a whole is to clean the slate, wipe out everything, and start all over again. It's a nice simple answer. But as with most nice simple answers, it badly underestimates the complexity of the issue and makes a colossal mess of the whole thing. Yes, God made a horrendous mess.

In this mess, Noah and his salvation seem to indicate a model showing how just a few righteous will be saved while the many sinful of the world will be destroyed. Many even today assume this model – few saved, most destroyed – reflects the divine model for how all things will end. That's really unfortunate.

Had they read this passage and understood it, they would see that the model of "few saved, most destroyed" is disavowed ... by none other than **God**. If it was such a good idea, God would be telling Noah something like, 'Tell your children and your children's children in every generation that if such sinfulness is ever occurs again in my creation, the consuming waters of the flood shall *return* and destroy all humanity.'

Instead, God says in verse 11: *I establish my covenant with you. **Never again** will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; **never again** will there be a flood to destroy the earth.*

God has made what seems to be a difficult course correction. Having brought the Flood, he appears to have some severe second thoughts, some buyer's remorse; maybe that wasn't such a good idea. Indeed, God has now probably figured that there has to be another way. After all, Noah and his family, as good and righteous as they are, are still human creatures, and humans can screw up in ways that confound even the Sovereign of all creation. These humans are something else altogether, not at all like ducks, ferns, trout, or coral.

By the end of the Flood, God has decided on another path. God forms a covenant with Noah and with all humanity that follows after him. The covenant has a few basic expectations from humans, spelled out before our passage – don't eat meat with its blood, and God will demand an accounting for the lifeblood of every animal and every human. *Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.*

God's part of the covenant is no more floods, signed, sealed and delivered with the rainbow as God's signature on the covenant formed by the waters.

It's interesting that God has decided to **limit** God's own capability for the sake of his human creation. God is likely hoping that this covenant will encourage greater attentiveness to righteousness by humans, anchoring commitment and discipline, resisting temptation and the compromise of righteousness. While God has decided to refrain from a flood, God has **not** done the anger management course yet. God can still get really ticked off and deliver a stunning zap.

The point is that God's covenant forms the future out of that watery cataclysm, creating a new promise of life for all humanity. It's the beginning of God's covenantal relationship with us, outside of the Garden, to enable our living into God's promise for us.

The covenant model will go through a number of revisions and renewals over the centuries and into the time of Jesus' appearance. It is time once again for God to frame the covenant anew for God's people, and Jesus brings the good news.

The passage from Mark is typical Mark. Like notations on an itinerary, Jesus comes from Nazareth, gets baptized, has God's voice announce 'You are my Son.' Then, *At once [!] the Spirit sent [Jesus] into the desert for 40 days* where he was tempted by Satan, where he was with wild animals, and angels attended him. Phew! Another example of Mark's breathless pace in his gospel.

In the act of baptism by John, the water invokes two things.

- First, upon coming out of the water, the heavens are torn asunder and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove – *like a dove*. (The Spirit of God is *not* a freaking dove. Doves are the same as pigeons. If the translators said *pigeon* instead of *dove*, maybe we wouldn't have this problem.)
- This is followed by the voice of God: *You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased*. Here God defines and identifies **this** individual who has been baptized by John.

The symbolic imagery of the heavens torn asunder and the alighting of the Spirit upon Jesus are intended to convey the clear break from whatever had gone before. (Remember, there is already a major dodge going on among the gospel writers to keep at bay the confusing question of Jesus' relationship to John the Baptist.) This clear break helps us – the readers or listeners – to recognize the radical change that occurs to Jesus in John's act of baptism. It suggests that this water defines Jesus, that in "heaven being torn open" and allowing "the Spirit to descend," Jesus is in effect commissioned in his ministry.

Note that it is the Spirit who sends Jesus into the wilderness desert. Jesus didn't come up with the idea that he should venture into the wilderness, according to Mark; that was the Spirit's idea. But the wilderness period, even as brief as it is in Mark's version, indicates that the spiritual struggle has begun. In the tight wording of Mark, the powers of the world are in the wilderness chaos, already threatening, menacing, and striving against this new being from God, authorized by heaven and commanded by the Spirit.

The terse Mark narrative continues: John is imprisoned, Jesus goes to Galilee, starts preaching. *The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!* Jesus' ministry, the struggle, the story of the good news, and his fateful journey ending at the cross has begun.

We can see the connection in the waters between Noah and the flood, and Jesus and the Johannine baptism. Baptism has a share in the legacy of the flood waters, in the ancient time of Noah when the bond of covenant was first formed. Baptism is the time when the covenant of faith is embraced by Jesus, and by all embracing faith in Jesus.

We begin the Lenten season by confronting once again the waters of the new life promise, re-connecting with the source of our new being. We are alerted to the new to change direction, to return to the waters of the new life promise, to wash away what may have grown old, commonplace, dull, and indistinct. Our connection to the promise of new life needs to be enlivened, renewed, and energized over the coming weeks as we share the journey of our Lord toward the cross, and the good news of new life in Him.